Afghan News Round Up for May 2013 Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service.

Also dues unpaid, woman journalist recognised and raising journalism standards, social attitudes

The spectre of Russia sending troops to Afghanistan after the coalition withdrawal was raised by media reports citing Russian Defence Ministry representative Sergei Koshelev saying Russian repair bases may be established in Afghanistan. The Defence and Foreign Ministries subsequently denied the reports.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich: "Moscow's position, that a return of the Russian military to Afghanistan is impossible, remains unchanged."

Moscow and Kabul have a military and technical co-operation agreement, under which Russian specialists repair Afghanistan's Russian-made military equipment. The pull-out in 2014 means that Moscow must re-evaluate the threats that will emerge on the borders of CIS countries.

Viktor Ivanov, director of Russia's Federal Drug Control Service, said that drug traffickers from Afghanistan were actively influencing the country's political development, turning Afghanistan into a global drugs production centre where the government is forced to serve the interests of criminal cartels.

Some British experts believe that after the presidential election, decentralisation in Afghanistan will result in unlimited autonomy in the country's southern, Pashtun-dominated regions.

Regarding the steps the CIS countries were planning to take to adapt to changes in Afghanistan beyond 2014, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said : "The Collective Security Treaty Organisation has a common strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, there are relevant plans within the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, and there are joint efforts of special services at the anti-terrorist centre that exists as part of the CIS."

In Moscow, later in the month, Putin told a meeting of his Security Council that U.S. and NATO-led forces "have not yet achieved a breakthrough in the fight against terrorist and radical groups" in Afghanistan and that these groups have become more active recently.

"We need to strengthen the security system in the strategic southern area, including its military component...There is every reason to believe that in the near future we may face a worsening of the situation. International terrorist and radical groups do not hide their plans to export instability," Putin said.

Russian experts believe the development of a new economic strategy for Afghanistan will change the course of the country's development.

Yuri Krupnov, chairman of the Society for Friendship and Co-operation with Afghanistan, said the country would need $50bn (£32bn) for accelerated industrialisation through 2020, of which Russia's contribution could reach $7bn.

The money would pay for pipeline transit projects from Turkmenistan to India and from Iran to India via Afghanistan, as well as for national electrification, if the post 2014 Afghan leadership maintain stability.

The catch 22 is that fullscale industrialisation in Afghanistan is impossible without resolving the security issues – and eliminating drug trafficking and security is considered by some to be impossible without industrialisation.

Dues Unpaid

The Afghan government will struggle to pay its share of its bills this year.

A confidential assessment by the International Monetary Fund blames widespread tax evasion abetted by government officials, theft of customs revenues by provincial governors, and weakening economic growth. The assessment estimated that Afghan revenue in the first quarter of the year was 20 to 30 percent short of the IMF's informal target. If the trend is not reversed, the Afghan government will be unable to pay salaries by midsummer.

The Afghan government is supposed to cover about 40 percent of its nonsecurity spending this year, roughly $5 billion.International donors pay most of Afghanistan's police force and army costs, and roughly 60 percent of the government's other spending this year.

The revenue problem illustrates a fundamental issue: a country that cannot pay for itself is not its own master.

"Let us be honest," Bernard Bajolet, the recently departed French ambassador, said at a farewell cocktail party. "Sovereignty won't be effective as long as Afghanistan won't be fully self-reliant financially."

Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal put the shortfall at no more than 20 percent. He attributed the shortfall largely to a shift in the start of the Afghan fiscal year to Dec. 21 from March 21, which resulted in people overpaying taxes last year.

He said 34 customs officials have been replaced "with more reputable, reform-minded and serious individuals. This is the biggest change in any single Afghan ministry in the past 12 years." Finance Ministry officials are under orders to more strictly enforce tax and customs rules, and any official caught abetting tax evasion or stealing customs duties will be fired, he said.

Mr. Zakhilwal blamed the international news media for offering a "negative analysis" of what will happen after 2014. That coverage, reflected in the Afghan news media, "has caused nervousness and has affected trade and business activities," he said.

Recognition for Afghan Journalist

An Afghan woman journalist has been awarded the 2013 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF).

Najiba Ayubi, 45, is managing director for The Killid Group.

She has spent more than a decade reporting on politics and women's rights, despite threats and persecution. Politicians have sent gunmen to her home and other aggressors have vowed to harm her family.

Najiba Ayubi follows Farida Nekzad and Sharif Akhlas to become the third IWMF Courage in Journalism Award winner from Afghanistan.

The winners will receive their awards in New York and Los Angeles in October this year. The Courage in Journalism Awards and Lifetime Achievement Award are sponsored by the Bank of America.

Delhi-based Afghan documentary film-maker Moska Najib is among 25 shortlisted for one of the six 'best jobs in the world' — lifestyle photographer in Melbourne. She is the only Afghan out of 600,000 applicants to be shortlisted. If she wins the job, she will earn Australian $100,000 in six months.

Social Attitudes

A Pew report on religious issues reveals that little has changed in public perceptions from in Afghanistan from the implementation of Shari'a and democracy, to honour killings and corruption.

Some 99% of the 1,509 respondents want Shari'a to be "the official law of the land," according

to the report, The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society, released at the end of April. In Pakistan it's 84%.

Politically, the poll shows that 53% of Afghans believe religious leaders should play a "large" role in politics, while 84% think it is a bad thing that their laws do not follow Shari'a. The Pew poll states that, "with the notable exception of Afghanistan, fewer than half of Muslims in any country surveyed say religious leaders should have a large influence in politics."

Afghan respondents were more ambivalent about politics in general in their country. When asked if they would prefer a powerful leader to a democracy, 51% said they would rather have a powerful leader, while 45% said they preferred a democracy. 54% of Afghans believe Islamic parties are better than political parties, while 19% say they are worse, and 22% say there is no difference.

94% of respondents agreed that "a wife is always obliged to obey her husband." 24% believe honour killings are never acceptable, but 60% said honour killings of women are "often or sometimes justified," while 59% said the same about executing men who have allegedly engaged in pre- or extramarital sex.

IWPR raise the game

The Institute of War and Peace Reporting's Afghanistan office is running a series of events and training courses leading to a conference to will design a framework for a standardised national university curriculum for journalism.

The first pre-conference discussions attracted deans and lecturers from journalism schools at five state universities, and the deputy minister for higher education, Mohammad Usman Babury.

The institutions concerned are collaborating with four American universities under the Afghanistan Journalism Education Enhancement Programme, funded by the United States embassy in Kabul.

IWPR's country director in Afghanistan, Noorrahman Rahmani, said it was clear that many journalists felt dissatisfied with the way the subject was taught at the moment.

"During this meeting, I sensed a gulf between working journalists and Afghan journalism schools. Journalists we've worked with complain that the schools lack study resources and teach from obsolete course materials, and that this is a hindrance when they enter the job market," he said. "For their part, journalism schools express unhappiness that many media outlets in Afghanistan are run by people who aren't professionals and don't have degrees in journalism. I'm hoping that these discussions and the Kabul Journalism Conference will close that gap."

At present, Afghan journalism schools use curricula that differ substantially from each other. One outcome of the meeting was a pledge that they would compile summaries of what they teach, how it differs from institution to institution, and why that it is. IWPR will collate these descriptions as a basis for the next set of discussions.

In remarks at the end of the meeting, Deputy Minister Babury suggested widening the scope of the debate to bring in privately-run universities as well.

IWPR will host two more discussion sessions ahead of the conference, and will also run a series of journalism training workshops for the five participating universities over the course of this project, which is being funded by the US embassy in Afghanistan.

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